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News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Veterans Get Job Opportunity

Six Veterans in the VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) got a new lease on life last month when they entered into the Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program and became the newest full-time employees at Black Hills National Cemetery near Sturgis, SD.

Apprentices were referred from VA BHHCS's Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program (HVSEP). HVSEP provides vocational assistance, job development and placement, and ongoing employment support to Veterans who are homeless, formerly homeless, or at-risk of homelessness and enrolled in a VA BHHCS Homeless Program.

"I am very proud of our HVSEP program in the way that they were able to come together and help implement this program," Compensated Work Therapy Supervisor Rodger Woeppel said. "In particular, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists Larry Pollard and Jeff Gephart were outstanding in identifying candidates and helping expedite the hiring process. The other sites selected had months to implement the project, but VA BHHCS and Black Hills National Cemetery were able to implement it in 48 hours."

Black Hills National Cemetery is one of five National Cemetery Administration (NCA) cemeteries that recently added Cemetery Caretaker Apprentices to their staffs. The Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program was launched in October. The six apprentices to start at Black Hills National Cemetery began work there on October 9.

"I jumped on with both feet when this came up," said Brian Taylor, a cemetery caretaker apprentice. "Being a Veteran makes it an honor to lay other Vets down to rest. It's a great job, it's an honorable job and a lot of people respect what we do."

NCA enhanced the existing NCA Cemetery Caretaker training program to develop the Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program. The Apprentice Program is a one-year, paid employment training program. Two weeks after they started work at Black Hills National Cemetery, the six Veterans went to St. Louis with 24 other cemetery caretaker apprentices. They took an intensive one-week training program there and returned for their year apprenticeship.

“They are going to go through a structured program and learn all the technical skills and the other components, like customer service. When they finish up here they’re going to have a solid set of skills in their bag,” Black Hills National Cemetery Director Bill Haggerty said. “Whether they decide to stay here or move on to another cemetery, they are going to have the skills and the reputation within the NCA to move forward. People there will know that these guys have gone through a very rigorous training program.”

The new cemetery caretakers undergo a one-year probationary period and receive the same benefits that other Federal employees receive. Those that complete the program will be able to compete competitively for future positions at higher grades at Black Hills National Cemetery, other national cemeteries, or in the private sector.

“They are cemetery caretakers, just like the ones we already have onboard,” Haggerty said. “They came through the door by a different route than the other employees, but they’re regular government employees. They have all the rights and responsibilities that anyone else has.”

Right now the six new cemetery caretakers are dividing their time between shadowing existing employees and formal training. They will spend time with a mechanic, a maintenance worker, the headstone crew, and the internment crew where they will learn a variety of different skills.

“I’m very impressed with them. They’re all very different, from different backgrounds. But they’re all going in the same direction. It’s very satisfying from my position to see this,” Haggerty said.

“It’s a pleasure knowing people that are in the right place, that have done it right,” David Kurttila, cemetery caretaker apprentice said. It’s really positive for me to work with people who have it together.”

Haggerty said that the Black Hills National Cemetery is a great environment for the apprenticeship program. His foreman is a cemetery caretaker trainer.

“Everyone is very open,” Kurttila said. “It’s changed my life knowing these guys. They know everything there is to know about this job, but they don’t act that way. They’re always willing to answer questions. They’re really nice people, all the way around.”

All six of the new cemetery caretaker apprentices expressed great pride in their new jobs and great appreciation for the VA employees that helped get them there. The feeling of pride also extends from the VA employees to the six Veterans.

“It is an honor that these Veterans will not only be taking care of my family and loved ones currently at the National Cemetery, but also may be taking care me someday,” Woeppel said.

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